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ABSTRACT

Given the strengths and weaknesses of previous research on second language writing, a study was undertaken to investigate the comments made by six native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) teachers of intermediate French regarding compositions written by their students. The teachers were asked to grade a set of regularly scheduled compositions, the first few silently and the next three aloud, commenting orally as they read and marked the compositions. This think-aloud protocol was audiotaped. Remaining papers were graded silently. The teachers were then asked to rate the comments they had marked on the three think-aloud papers. Follow-up interviews several weeks later focused on teachers' attitudes toward writing and feedback. Comments were categorized in terms of sentence level and lower concerns, comments beyond the sentence level, and comments regarding pedagogical issues. The cases indicate that teacher response is fairly uniform, with sentence level concerns the clear focus of both oral and written comments. It is suggested that there is a need for an increased awareness about goals in second language learning. The comparative results are tabulated. Contains 21 references. (LB)

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Native and Non-native Speaker Teacher Response to Foreign Language Learner Writing: A Study of Intermediate Level French

MARGARET ANN KASSEN

Introduction

Although recent emphasis on target language (TL) production in the foreign language (FL) classroom has largely centered on the speaking skill, there is a growing interest in written production as well. This interest has in part been motivated by the intensification of inquiry into the field of composition in the first language (L1) that has occurred in the 1980's. Whether writing is done in the first or second language, all teachers share a common responsibility: to respond to their students' writing. Likewise in both L1 and L2 contexts, it is axiomatic that teachers spend considerable time and effort endeavoring to provide feedback to students about their writing. Yet despite this investment made by teachers, researchers have accumulated relatively small amounts of data demonstrating how teachers actually respond. Certainly, the comments made by teachers could provide a wealth of insights into teachers' attitudes about writing.

Review of Literature in the L1 Context

First language studies that explore actual teacher feedback find that the comments teachers make frequently subvert their original intentions in responding. Although teachers believe that it is important to let writers know if their ideas have been successfully communicated, researchers find that teachers tend to focus on form errors rather than on meaning (Brannon and Knoblauch, 1982; Butler, 1980; Searle and Dillon, 1980; and Sommers, 1982). Instead of helping writers understand how a reader responds to a text, teachers take control, or appropriate, student writing (Brannon and Knoblauch, 1982). Despite considerable research on the process of writing, students are often not given the opportunity to revise their work (Ziv, 1984). Even when revision is included in the curriculum, an error correction focus of marking reinforces a superficial view of revision (Sommers, 1982). Examination of the comments themselves has revealed that they are frequently vague, contradictory, and difficult to interpret (Butler, 1980; Sommers, 1982; and Ziv, 1984).

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The work of researchers to describe teacher comments and to examine them in the light of accepted teacher goals has clear pedagogical implications. In addition to their pragmatic function, these findings likewise contribute toward building a theory of responding to student writing (Griffin ,1982).

Review of Literature in the L2 Context

In the second language field, the approaches to investigating teacher responses to learner writing are varied. Three principal areas of investigation identifiable in the literature are: (1) empirical studies designed to test the efficacy of different comment types, (2) analyses of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) reactions to learner production, and (3) investigation of L2 teachers' actual comments on student texts. This first group of studies, those which manipulate feedback types to determine which types of comments are the most beneficial to writing (see Lalande, 1982; Semke, 1984; and Robb, Ross and Shortreed, 1986), do not result in insights into the broad range of possible teacher comments. Thus, the second and third areas of inquiry are more directly applicable in developing a description of teacher response.

The body of research on native speaker reaction to learner language developed out of the assumption that the NS has the competence necessary to judge learner production according to criteria such as comprehensibility and acceptability (see Ludwig, 1982 for a review of this literature). The findings of these studies have implications in guiding selective correction feedback, especially for the benefit of NNS teachers. In a recent study of NS teacher and NNS teacher response to compositions written by German learners of English, Green and Hecht (1985) found that NNS teachers tended to be more severe in their judgments of error gravity than NS teachers, thus supporting earlier findings of James (1980) and Galloway (1980). Green and Hecht also observed that the NS and the NNS teachers rarely viewed the student texts as discourse, which caused the researchers to suggest that language teachers may be too sentence-centered in evaluating L2 written discourse.

The third area of L2 research, focussing on actual teacher responses to writing, is comprised of one study by Zamel (1985). She analyzes the written comments made by English as a Second Language teachers on their students' regularly assigned compositions. After comparing her findings with those of

Sommers, she concluded that there was one major difference between L2 teachers' responses and those of L1 teachers: second language teachers responded as *language* teachers, focusing largely on surface, sentence-level features. Zamel's remaining observations corresponded to Sommers's findings: (1) teachers rarely made content-oriented comments, (2) first drafts were treated as final products, and (3) corrections were inconsistent, vague, or contradictory.

An attempt to describe teacher responding behavior must certainly look at teachers' comments on their own students' papers, as Zamel did. The study should not constrain informants to underline errors as in Green and Hecht, but should rather allow them to respond naturally. Just analyzing written comments, however, is not sufficient. As Butler (1980) says, the meaning behind comments often remains locked inside the teacher's head, so some access is needed to what teachers think as they respond. Furthermore, the comments need to be analyzed according to what the goals of second language composition and feedback are, goals which need to be articulated. Lastly, given the make-up of many university level faculties, the question of possible NS/NNS teacher differences needs to be addressed.

The Present Study

Given the strengths and weaknesses of the previous research, the study reported on here was designed to investigate the comments made by NS teachers and NNS teachers of intermediate French with regards to compositions written by their respective students. The following questions will direct the investigation:

1. What are the concerns expressed by L2 teachers in their reactions to student compositions?
2. Do L2 teachers address similar issues in their comments?
3. Are there any differences between NS teacher and NNS teacher reactions?
4. Do written markings accurately reflect teacher comments?
5. Is teacher feedback consistent with self-expressed goals?

Procedure

Subjects Six teachers of intermediate level French at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this study. The subjects, all females, ranged in age from 23 to 40, and had had from 2 to 15 years of teaching experience each. The three native

speaker subjects also spoke English and had spent at least two years in the United States, while the three non-native subjects had spent one or two years in France. One NS participant was French Canadian but had attended French schools in Canada and had done her *terminale* (last year of secondary school) in France.

Method In one session with the researcher, each informant evaluated a class set of the second regularly scheduled composition of the semester. To encourage the subjects to follow their normal responding procedure, the teachers were asked to mark the first two or three compositions silently. Then, the informants responded to the next three papers aloud, commenting orally as they read and marked the compositions. This think-aloud protocol was audiotaped. After the grade alouds were completed, the teachers continued marking the rest of the class set of papers. To conclude the session, the subjects were asked to rate the comments they had marked on the three think-aloud papers on a scale of seriousness: least, fairly and most serious. Though xerox copies were made of the entire class set of evaluated compositions, this report analyzes data collected only from those compositions graded aloud. The final stage of the study took place several weeks later, when follow-up interviews were conducted by the researcher to inquire into the informants' attitudes towards writing and feedback.

Results Both the written and the oral comments made by the informants on the three think-alouds were transcribed and coded according to subtypes. For the purpose of analysis, the15 subtypes were subsumed into three major categories: (1) comments refering to sentence level and lower concerns, (2) comments moving beyond the sentence level, and (3) comments involving pedagogical issues. Within the first group, the subjects were found to react to graphemics, morphology, syntax and lexical selection. The second group included responses to context, organization, cohesion, lexical repetition, content and the individual student writer. The last major heading applied to comments about previous instruction, level of instruction, the specific assignment and notions of what the teacher expected of the students.

Table 1 presents the proportion of total comments in each subtype and major category for each informant on all three think alouds. The frequencies indicated here support Green and Hecht's

claim that teachers respond most often to concerns at or below the sentence level. Data from the error seriousness ratings were similarly combined and are displayed in Table 2. Finally, a sampling of responses to two questions from the follow-up interviews is presented in Table 3. In the next section, the findings will be examined in terms of the original research questions.

Discussion

Before interpreting the findings, one aspect of the study needs to be clarified. In preserving the natural teacher-student relationship by having each informant evaluate her own students' writing, it was necessary to sacrifice comparability across subjects. It must be kept in mind that the students' writing abilities directly affected the informants' responses such that one teacher's comments cannot be compared to anothers'. However, the proportions of the varying types of comments do give us insight into the individual informant's concerns and about possible trends that might merit further investigation.

Concerns expressed in comments. In considering the first question, we must return to the categories delineated in Table 1. It is also worth noting that NS and NNS alike responded to all errors at the sentence level, with very few oversights occurring. Spelling, morphology, and syntax errors prompted the largest proportion of comments for all subjects. In one instance, the instructor focused so intently on correctness of form that a problem in meaning was overlooked. To explain how he would bring his friends gifts if he were rich and famous, a student wrote, "je ne me souviendrais jamais mes amis." [I would never remember my friends.] The teacher commented aloud, "Alors, c'est pas mal. C'est un verbe difficile. Il y a d'ailleurs le de là..." [Well, that's not bad. That's a difficult verb. There is though the preposition *de* missing there.] Semantic concerns were the next most frequent response type. Beyond the sentence level, comments were made less frequently, but all subjects did express some discourse level and pedagogical concerns.

Similarity of concerns. The data provided by the six subjects in this study indicate that these L2 teachers shared common concerns. All of the informants commented on 5 of the 15 subcategories, and at least five commented on 10 of the 15. Some

similarity in responses may have been due to the sampling procedure employed in this study, as all participants taught the same course according to a departmental syllabus under the supervision of one of the informants. Although the composition did occur at the same time in the syllabus for all participants, the individual instructors assigned their own composition topics and were free to mark their students' papers as they wished.

Native vs.non-native speaker reactions. The data in Table 1 do not provide any indication of systematic differences between NS and NNS subjects. While previous research suggests that NS tend to focus more on message than on form, the comments evaluated in this study do not reflect this perspective. Furthermore, error gravity ratings (as seen in Table 2) do not provide conclusive evidence supporting the view that NS are less severe. Two of the three NS studied do tend to be less severe, but the third subject's judgments closely resemble those of the NNS subjects. Speculation about what might have resulted in this lack of clear differentiation leads back to the possibility that the philosophy of the French department employing these teachers and that of the supervisor might have artificially constrained reactions. It is also possible that the informants interpreted the researcher's interest to be one of error correction and that they responded accordingly in their comments. On the other hand, the emphasis that NS respondents placed on form may be a reflection of their own writing training in French schools. Three of the six informants (2 NS and 1 NNS) mentioned this as a possibility.

Comparing written markings to oral comments. The think aloud comments on features at the sentence level and below matched the written markings very closely. Indeed, more feedback at this level was provided on the student texts than on the protocol, as the subjects seemed to instinctively mark all errors very quickly while their spoken comments were slightly more selective. Except for one subject who decided to ask her students to rewrite the composition, all informants used overt correction procedures, providing the students with corrections of spelling, morphology, syntax and vocabulary. While in some cases the correction was self-explanatory, at other times, the simple comment reflected teacher concerns that remained outside the student's grasp. For example, when one subject read, "...j'aurai d'argent..." [I will have {any} money], she added *assez*

[enough],...j'aurai assez d'argent [I will have enough money] instead of adding the partitive construction *de l'* (j'aurai de l'argent [I will have {some} money]) because, according to her oral comment, she wanted to keep the student's structure intact. Another subject, when reading "...je ne travaillerais pas maintenant" [I would not work now.] crossed out *maintenant* [now], thinking aloud that the adverb was inappropriate in that context. These and numerous other examples can be found in the grade alouds, illustrating that the reasons behind markings may be clear to responders yet unclear to the student looking at the simple markings on the page. While in some cases, this problem cannot be resolved even by additional time- and space-consuming comments, it may be desirable for teachers to communicate their goals to students. A comment could be amended to the teacher's composition grading handout, explaining that though there are many ways of expressing a given thought, the teacher will make an effort to correct errors in such a way that the student's chosen structure is preserved whenever possible.

Responding to concerns beyond the sentence level, the informants wrote down fewer comments than they actually made during the think alouds. On the issue of context, two informants wrote comments while five commented orally. Only one subject wrote a comment about content despite the fact that all informants had reacted orally to students' messages. Five of the six participants commented aloud on organization, yet only one provided written feedback on this concern, and her feedback was limited to the number of points awarded for that criterion on her analytical grading scheme. It would appear, thus, that the informants in this study had no difficulty in dealing with their sentence level concerns, but that they were not as successful in communicating their discourse level concerns. This issue will be discussed again in the following section when pedagogical goals are analyzed.

Before continuing to the final research question, let us look at the ratings of error gravity for an additional comparison of written and oral comments. As can be seen by the responses in Table 2, the participants perceived errors as having different levels of seriousness. In spite of this general agreement, only one teacher employed a marking system which reflected discrimination among errors. This subject marked the items she held the students responsible for in red, while errors that were judged beyond the students' level were corrected in green. The other participants

marked all comments in the same way, even though a large percentage of the errors were considered to be of little importance. While the grade feedback (X, -1, -2, etc.) written in the margins by some responders might be considered an effort to communicate the importance of certain errors to students, these markings were often ambiguous. According to data collected in the think alouds, the same grade marking was used to indicate a single error as well as a cluster of errors. Sometimes the grade indicator was placed between two lines of writing such that the student could not know which line contained the error(s) to which the teacher was reacting.

Comments in relation to goals In the follow-up interview, each informant was asked questions about writing pedagogy. When questioned about the role of composition in the L2 context, the subjects unanimously responded that composition gave the students the opportunity to use vocabulary and grammatical structures that had been studied in class. The strong concordance of opinion on this issue helps to explain why the informants' attention was so focussed on sentence level concerns.

The second most frequently mentioned role of composition was that it allowed the students to express personal ideas. Indeed, several informants claimed that the aspect of composition that they appreciated most was that it allowed them to get to know their students better. Here, an inconsistency is apparent: the teachers wanted their students to express themselves and claimed to attend to students' messages, yet they rarely gave students any indication of attention to content in their comments.

A number of the informants indicated that concerns such as organization and content were more relevant at more advanced stages of language instruction. This view helps to explain why the responders did not write comments on these higher level concerns on the student texts.

When asked about why they gave feedback on composition, the respondents were in less agreement and were less confident about their answers. The most frequent response, offered by three of the informants, was that feedback built up students' confidence, helping them realize that they could write in French. Some participants wrote words of encouragement like *Bon* [Good] or *Mieux* [Better] at the top or end of student texts. However, in discussing feedback to L1 writers, Sommers questions the value of vague, rubber stamp comments such as these. The grading

scheme of two subjects was constructed so that students received credit for communication as well as accuracy, a procedure which was designed to communicate to students the instructor's concern for content. Several informants indicated that the students would be encouraged simply by the grades themselves, because the writing grades were slightly higher than those on daily quizzes and tests. Overall, grades were viewed as a strong motivating factor by these informants because the vast majority of their students were taking French to fill a university requirement. Until additional investigations are conducted into student attitudes (such as those by Semke and Cardelle and Corno), we will not be able to make definitive statements about whether the teachers are indeed achieving their affective goals by the means they described.

Another value of feedback verbalized by informants was that it made students aware of where their problems were. Occasionally, the teachers made general comments about particular strengths and/or weaknesses, but on the whole, only overt feedback was employed. One subject took notes on the most common errors, intending to discuss them in class. On the whole, comprehensive error correction was used, a technique which though identifying errors, does not serve a clear remedial function. Despite the subjects' belief in the importance of making students aware of their inaccurate TL hypotheses, they were rather pessimistic in their estimations of the percentage of students who would actually look over the comments if no rewrites were required. They reported that perhaps only one student out of a class of 20 would voluntarily consult the teacher regarding comments made on the composition. In fact, one informant was so convinced of the ineffectiveness of feedback that she claimed to provide comments largely out of a sense of professional conscience. Given such discrepancies between goals and perceived effectiveness, researchers certainly need to do more to address the issues involved.

Conclusions and Implications

This examination of teacher comments provides insight into what the major concerns of L2 teachers are. The cases studied here suggest that teacher response is fairly uniform. Sentence level concerns were the clear focus of both oral and written comments. Attention to context, content, organization and other such concerns beyond the sentence level was less frequent and less likely to be mentioned in written comments that appeared on

the student texts. It must be remembered that the scope of this study was very restricted (6 instructors of French at one university). As a result, no claims for generalizability to other language instructors in other contexts are made, yet these findings regarding the concern for form over content support earlier conclusions of research in the L1 context (Searle and Dillon) and in the L2 context (Green and Hecht, Zamel).

Although it may seem self-evident, it appears that we as teachers need to be reminded that students see only the marks on the page. Evidence from this study as well as from previous investigations suggests that the markings themselves are often vague, difficult to interpret and ambiguous. The markings may also fail to present a true picture of how serious the teacher judges the error to be. While it may not be possible to resolve all these problems given the limitations on teachers' time, an increased awareness of these issues may help us become more sensitive to our students needs and more communicative of our own expectations.

The importance of pedagogical goals is also highlighted by this study. While the goal of attending to surface level issues is consistent with marking practices, one word of caution bears repeating regarding this dominant focus on form: teachers may unintentionally be communicating a narrow, restricted view of writing and language use to their students. While linguistic accuracy receives a high priority from FL practitioners, concerns such as cohesion, content, organization, etc. must also be represented to language learners through written comments.

Whether teachers' comments promote their goal of encouraging students to express themselves is less certain. When few or no personal comments are written on student papers, it is unlikely that students will be aware of the teacher's interest. Dialog journals and other types of free writing may be more appropriate for fulfilling this goal than formal composition.

Even more importantly, the notion that discourse concerns are somehow better suited for advanced levels of instruction needs to be questioned. This belief seems to imply that language learning progresses from an emphasis on form in the early stages to a focus on higher level concerns in the later stages. This view is clearly not supported in the literature on language use in general (Grice, 1975; and Steinmann, 1982), nor in Krashen's theory of second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982), nor in the recent work on the process of writing (Flower and Hayes, 1981).

Recent publications about L2 pedagogy also refute this notion. Taylor (1981) states that since most L2 students never achieve native speaker proficiency, teachers "cannot justify indefinitely postponing a pedagogical emphasis on content in favor of form." Dvorak (1986), after examining second language acquisition theory and first language writing research, concludes that teachers should respond to content, organization, clarity and coherence, while limiting error correction to those places where straightforward rules apply. This study only analyzed comments at the intermediate level of instruction; future investigations should examine feedback and goals at different levels to determine how sentence level and suprasentential concerns are articulated throughout the FL curriculum.

Although this study was unable to identify separate trends for NS and NNS teachers, the question regarding differences between the two groups is still not resolved. This researcher plans to modify the experimental design in a follow-up study such that informants will also respond to a common composition, thus allowing comparisons to be made across subjects. Future inquiry should also consider the teaching context (effects of departments/supervisors) and attitudes toward written language in relation to educational background.

What emerges from the cases examined here is the need for an increased awareness on our part as teachers about our goals and expectations of learners writing in the second language, the appropriateness of these goals based on L2 research, and how we communicate our goals through feedback on student papers. Additional research is needed to examine student affective reaction to feedback and to determine effective types of feedback. Differences among teachers should be studied to determine which factors (such as NS/NNS, educational background, etc.) influence our responses. By pursuing this topic from a number of perspectives, we will come closer to being able to articulate a theory of responding to FL student writing.

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TABLE 1
Percentage of total comments by types for each subject

Subject	Sentence level and lower		Beyond sentence level		Pedagogical concerns	
NS 1	grammar	79.5	context	1.5	previous instruction	
	vocabulary	12.9	content	1.5	and assignment	2.3
			cohesion	.8	level	.8
			organization	.8	follow-up	0
			repetition	0	ideal text	0
			individual	0		
	TOTAL	92.4	TOTAL	4.5	TOTAL	3.1
NS 2	grammar	61.9	context	0	previous instruction	
	vocabulary	19.4	content	1.0	and assignment	5.2
			cohesion	1.0	level	0
			organization	1.0	follow-up	0
			repetition	4.1	ideal text	0
			individual	6.2		
	TOTAL	81.4	TOTAL	13.4	TOTAL	5.2
NS 3	grammar	60.6	context	1.1	previous instruction	
	vocabulary	19.1	content	3.2	and assignment	8.5
			cohesion	0	level	1.1
			organization	0	follow-up	0
			repetition	3.2	ideal text	0
			individual	3.2		
	TOTAL	79.8	TOTAL	10.6	TOTAL	9.6

NNS 1	grammar	51.7	context	1.1	previous instruction		
	vocabulary	14.3	content	3.3	and assignment	3.3
			cohesion	3.3	level	2.2
			organization	2.2	follow-up	4.4
			repetition	0	ideal text	1.1
			individual	13.2		
	TOTAL	65.9	TOTAL	23.1	TOTAL	11.0
NNS 2	grammar	60.7	context	2.8	previous instruction		
	vocabulary	9.4	content	3.7	and assignment	12.2
			cohesion	1.9	level	2.8
			organization	.9	follow-up	0
			repetition	.9	ideal text	0
			individual	4.7		
	TOTAL	70.1	TOTAL	15.0	TOTAL	15.0
NNS 3	grammar	50.5	context	.9	previous instruction		
	vocabulary	19.3	content	4.6	and assignment	10.1
			cohesion	0	level	2.8
			organization	3.7	follow-up	2.8
			repetition	0	ideal text	1.9
			individual	3.7		
	TOTAL	69.7	TOTAL	12.8	TOTAL	16.5

TABLE 2
Judgements of error gravity by percentage per subject

Native Speaker	least*	fairly	very	NN Speakers	least	fairly	very
NS 1	75.5	18.4	6.1	NNS 1	34	32	34
NS 2	30.2	31.7	38.1	NNS 2	40	45	15
NS 3	62.2	23.6	13.9	NNS 3	40.5	40.5	19

* This category includes those errors classed as not at all serious by NS1, NS2, NS3 and NNS2.

TABLE 3
Interview results on two questions

Question 1: What do you perceive is the role of composition in the second language classroom?

Responses	Subjects NS1	NS2	NS3	NNS1	NNS2	NNS3
A. to provide learners with the opportunity to use previously studied grammar structures, vocabulary items	x	x	x	x	x	x
B. to provide learners with the opportunity to express their own ideas	x	x		x	x	x
C. to reinforce oral oral language skills		x	x			
D. to help learners organize their thoughts			x			
E. to provide learners with the opportunity to use extended discourse					x	

Question 2: What value is there in providing feedback?

Responses	Subjects NS1	NS2	NS3	NNS1	NNS2	NNS3
A. to encourage students	x	x	x		x	
B. to orient learners to expression in French		x		x	x	
C. to help students identify basic problems						x
D. to call learners attention errors					x	
E. to fulfill professional obligation	x					